

## Schenectady Police grapple with how to rethink response to mental health calls

By Pete DeMola | November 9, 2020



*Schenectady Police Chief Eric Clifford - File photo*

SCHENECTADY — As a series of police reform meetings hurtles toward its conclusion, a consensus is emerging that mental health calls may better be handled by agencies more equipped to respond to them than city police.

Sgt. Bill Gannon said shifting the responsibility would allow officers to attend to more urgent backlogged calls.

And while he acknowledged officers are trained to assess and stabilize situations: “We’re not mental health experts, and we’re not counselors,” Gannon said.

Panelists across the city, from cops to clergy, have been grappling with how to modify response protocols at a series of police reform meetings, including three sessions held last week.

Mental health issues are often linked to altercations that result in the death of suspects at the hands of police, including the death of Walter Wallace last month, who was fatally shot by Philadelphia police officers after he approached them with a knife. His family later said he was having a mental health crisis.

Calls to police concerning EDPs, or emotionally disturbed persons, constitute a high percentage of volume.

“I’d say besides domestics, those are probably the highest number of calls that we’re going to,” said Sgt. Nick Mannix.

Volume has been steadily high for a while, said city Police Chief Eric Clifford. But the department noted an uptick as those struggling with mental health and substance abuse issues began to be shifted to outpatient treatment services in the mid-2000s.

Police are often dispatched as a default because of their 24-hour availability as well as the likelihood of violence.

Cops wrestled with possible policy changes during a virtual roundtable with social services providers last week as part of the state-mandated process to reform the department with community feedback.

Officers said any talk of possible solutions must be paired with addressing their steadily expanding workload.

As their responsibilities continue to widen, Sgt. Adriel Linyear said officers themselves should come to a consensus for what their roles are and redefine them if necessary.

“We’ve been tasked with doing the role of social worker and all of these things to a point,” Linyear said.

Clifford believes roles are expanding both due to the increasing complexity of policing paired with higher expectations from the public.

And officers are now squarely under the microscope with civilian-shot smartphone video paired with a news media more attuned to reporting on social injustice, he said.

Mannix last week floated the idea of hiring mental health counselors to accompany police on EDP calls, a suggestion that was met with positive reception.

“Even us going out with the counselors would be a huge step in the right direction,” Gannon said. “Certainly redistributing the responsibility of what police are being asked to do, I think there’s a valid opportunity to see some change there.”

Sgt. James Plowden said those counselors would also be useful in helping track and monitor responses to high-needs individuals who may cycle through several officers during multiple calls, leading to information gaps.

Counselors could also loop in social services providers to develop action plans designed to assist with future responses.

The main goal when responding is to de-escalate the situation, Clifford said.

But while officers receive training, responding to EDPs is an entire educational discipline in itself, he said, and the department has been working with social service agencies for years to boost training, implement harm reduction strategies, share data and expand educational platforms.

“This is a topic that will probably be front and center on our reform,” Clifford said.

City police partner with Northern Rivers’ Mobile Crisis Response Team on mental health calls, but officials have previously acknowledged it can be tough to immediately deploy staffers in fast-moving and uncertain situations (and those staffers are only dispatched after police review the situation).

The city Fire Department plays more of a supportive role if needed, and are only called in to treat and transport patients for any medical components to the call.

“We’re more about just getting them to the place that’s giving them the assistance they need,” said city Assistant Fire Chief Don Mareno.

Darin Samaha, director of the county Office of Community Services, liked the idea of pairing officers with counselors, and said partnerships generally lead to better outcomes for patients.

“The frequent calls to the [police department] would go down,” Samaha said.

Stephanie Lao, executive director of Catholic Charities Care Coordination Services, asked if the city had considered implementing a Law Enforcement-Assisted Diversion, or LEAD, program designed to reduce participation in the criminal justice system for those struggling with substance abuse or mental health issues.

Catholic Charities works as the case manager for the Albany Police Department’s program.

“I think it really does speak to some of the things that have been said,” Lao said. “It doesn’t require an officer to suddenly become a social worker.”

Yet a program would, however, require some acknowledgement by police of the complexities that exist in responding to EDP calls, Lao said, and would give officers discretion to bring in another entity to help assess the situation.

Social services agencies on the call said they had strong relationships with city police, and also said they like to get together more in non-emergency situations.

Mayor Gary McCarthy said the city would look into a LEAD program and said the city overall is moving toward a more integrated response between all city departments and social service agencies.

“How do you get the total picture, and when sending resources there — whether police, fire or someone else — that you’re able to deal with the problem in totality and better refer people?” McCarthy said.

Tim Rizzo, vice president of the Schenectady PBA, said funding would undoubtedly be a factor when weighing any potential changes, and there has not been any clarity from those calling to “defund” the police on what those scenarios would ultimately look like.

“To properly handle the amount of mental health calls that we go to, you would require a pretty large staff in order to go to all of those calls,” Rizzo said.

The fifth and final police reform panel discussion will be held Tuesday, with a wrap meeting to follow on Thursday.